Our Bees, Our Honey & The Cocktails They Inspire

Four storeys above Knox Street, something quite extraordinary is happening. Tucked onto the rooftop of our venue are beehives, home to tens of thousands of bees who have made Chippendale their territory, foraging across the gardens, parks and flowering streets of inner Sydney to create something genuinely special.

This is urban beekeeping, and after a decade of tending our hives, we can tell you the honey they produce is unlike anything else.

Our Hives

We keep two hives on the rooftop, each led by their own queens - Barbara and Mary. While a worker bee lives for just six weeks, working themselves quite literally to death, a queen can live for three to five years, spending her days doing one thing, laying eggs. And she does it at a remarkable pace, up to 2,000 eggs a day at peak season, meaning a single queen can be responsible for millions of bees across her lifetime. She is the heartbeat of the hive, and when she is thriving, everything thrives around her. It's why we pay attention, why we give her a name, and why losing a queen is never a small thing.

To keep track of Barbara & Mary among the thousands of bees in each hive, we mark them with a small dot of paint on their thorax. This year in yellow, the internationally recognised colour for queens born in 2026. It sounds like a small thing, but finding a marked queen in a full, busy hive is one of the quiet satisfactions of beekeeping. Beyond identification, watching the queen tells you everything about the health and rhythm of the hive. As the days shorten heading toward the winter solstice, she naturally begins to wind back her laying. The hive shrinks and conserves energy, needing less food and generating less activity. Then, as the solstice passes and the days become longer, something shifts. She starts laying again in earnest, the population builds, and by the time spring arrives and Sydney's gardens are flowering, the hive is surging back to full strength. Thousands of new bees hatching just in time for the best foraging of the year.

Urban bees are remarkable foragers. Without the monocultures of commercial agriculture around them, they roam freely across a rich and varied landscape of flowering trees, rooftop gardens, window boxes and community plots, drawing nectar from thousands of different sources. The result is a honey that is complex, layered and constantly evolving with the seasons.

Sydney's dense inner-city gardens, abundant street trees and near year-round flowering climate make it one of Australia's most natural fits for urban beekeeping. Rooftop hives have become an increasingly common sight above the inner city, part of a broader movement that Knox Street Bar has been part of from early on.

A healthy hive is a masterpiece of organised labour - every bee has a job.

- **The Queen**: the sole egg-layer, her only role is reproduction
- **Worker bees**: all female, they make up most of the hive and rotate through roles as they age: nursing larvae, building and maintaining comb, guarding the entrance, and foraging for nectar, pollen and water
- **Foragers**: experienced workers who venture out to collect nectar and communicate its location back to the hive through the waggle dance
- **Nurse bees**: tend to the eggs and larvae, feeding them and regulating the temperature of the brood
- **Guard bees**: stationed at the entrance, they inspect every returning bee and repel intruders
- **Drone bees**: the only males in the hive, they do no foraging, no building and no guarding. Their sole purpose is reproduction. Each day in good weather they fly to a Drone Congregation Area, a patch of sky where drones from hives across the neighbourhood gather and wait for a virgin queen to pass through. The oval above Sydney University is believed to be one such spot. Nobody fully understands how these areas are chosen, but bees return to the same locations year after year. Most days a drone will return without having mated. The chances on any given flight are slim, so they try again the next day, and the next. The rare drone that does mate successfully dies almost immediately, the act itself fatal. Those that never mate face a simple end, as winter approaches and food must be conserved, the workers turn on them, dragging them out of the hive and refusing re-entry. Drones have no sting and no means of defence, and they don't last long outside. Our queens have already made their mating flights, though their story isn't necessarily over. A thriving queen may one day leave with a swarm or be quietly replaced if the hive decides her time has passed. For now, Barbara and Mary are strong, and that solitary mating flight remains the last time either of them ventured beyond the rooftop.

A New Queen

A new queen is created when the hive collectively decides it needs a new one. There are two situations that trigger this. The first is swarming: when a colony grows strong and populous enough, the existing queen will leave with roughly half the workers to find a new home, an extraordinary airborne exodus that can look alarming but is a sign of a thriving, healthy hive. Before she goes, the workers prepare for her departure by building special queen cells and filling them with fertilised eggs. These eggs are fed exclusively on royal jelly, a protein-rich secretion produced by nurse bees, and it is this diet alone, (not genetics) that transforms an ordinary fertilised egg into a new queen.



The second situation is when the existing queen begins to fail by laying less reliably or showing signs of age or illness. The workers will quietly raise a replacement without swarming, allowing the old queen and her successor to briefly coexist before the new queen takes over. The workers tolerate both while the new queen matures, mates and proves herself as a layer. Once she is laying reliably, the old queen is usually killed by the workers or simply fades and dies. In both cases, the first virgin queen to emerge will seek out and sting any rival queens still in their cells.

The Harvest

We harvest twice a year, following the natural rhythm of the hive and the seasons. When the frames are ready (2-2.5kg each), we bring them down to our kitchen and spin the honey out using a traditional extractor, a process that keeps the honey raw and full of character. Each hive produces around 50kg of honey each year.



The Spin

Once the frames are ready to harvest, we bring them down from the rooftop to our kitchen and load them into an extractor - a honey spinner that uses centrifugal force to draw the honey out of the comb without destroying it. It's a satisfying process: the frames spin, the honey flies to the walls of the drum and runs down into the tank below, and the comb itself is left mostly intact, ready to go back up to the bees so they can clean and fill it all over again. Nothing is wasted. Once spun, the honey is filtered through gauze to remove any traces of wax or debris, then bottled by hand right here in our kitchen. Each batch is a little different and a reflection of where the bees have been foraging, what was flowering across Chippendale and the mood of the hive.



As Local As It Gets

If you've only ever tasted commercial honey, our rooftop harvest will be a revelation. Urban honey has a terroir all its own, lighter in colour and more fragrant in flavour than anything mass produced, floral, delicate and nuanced in a way that reflects exactly where our bees have been roaming. It carries the character of the neighbourhood itself, and there are few better examples of the locavore ideal than honey made four storeys above the bar it's served in.

There’s no blending, no pasteurisation, no standardising. What you taste is exactly what the bees made.



Honey Infused Cocktails



Our rooftop honey inspires three cocktails on the menu, each one a little different in character.

The **Lavender Bees Knees** pairs Hendrick's gin with fresh lemon juice, lavender bitters and honeycomb - floral, sharp and elegant, riffing on a Prohibition-era classic that has never really gone out of style.

The **Honeycomb Whisky Sour** is the richer, warmer sibling - Monkey Shoulder whisky shaken with fresh lemon juice, honey, egg whites and bitters, finished with a honeycomb garnish. It's the kind of drink that makes the honey the hero rather than just a sweetener.



For those skipping the alcohol, the **Honey Refresher** holds its own - Four Pillars Bloody Shiraz botanicals with grapefruit juice, soda and a grapefruit twist, lifted by honey into something genuinely worth ordering.

All three start on the roof.

What's in the glass on any given night also reflects exactly what was flowering across Chippendale when the honey was harvested, which means no two batches are quite the same and neither, subtly, are the drinks. If you'd like to take a jar home, our honey is available for sale at the bar.

Ask us about our rooftop honey - we're always happy to talk bees.